952
B811
0

U.C. BERKELEY LIBRARY

UC-NRLF
B 3 575 524

cop. 1

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ART-EPIC AND THE FOLK-EPIC

CORNELIUS B. BRADLEY

[Reprinted from the UNIVERSITY CHRONICLE, Vol. VIII. No. 4]

BERKELEY
THE UNIVERSITY PRESS
1906

952
B811
O

ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ART-EPIC AND THE FOLK-EPIC.[1]

CORNELIUS B. BRADLEY.

When we call the Paradise Lost and other poems of its kind Art-epics, and so distinguish them from certain others which we call Folk-epics, we do not mean, I imagine, that the two are necessarily different in subject-matter or in essentials of treatment: for the so-called Art-epics have confessedly copied the others in these points. Nor do we mean that in genesis and development the two are different throughout. It is clear that both kinds alike strike their roots deep into the same subsoil of communal consciousness and of racial activity wherein are the beginnings of spiritual and artistic life for man. Both kinds take shape under the determining influence of prevalent ideals of beauty, of conduct, and of character, which are racial and not individual. The ultimate materials for both, whether in the form of story, myth, legend, cosmogony, or theology, are, as we know, the resultants of coöperative efforts on the part of untold generations of men. The earlier stage then is essentially alike in both; and so too is the final. For the final form in both is determined by the fusing, the coördination, and reduction of all this mass in the central glow of some individual imagination, and the recasting of it in the mold of a single, adequate, poetic form. Whatever differences then we discern between the Art-epic and the Folk-epic

[1] Paper read at a meeting of the Philological Club, April, 1905.

136642

must be either differences in the intermediate stage directly affecting the final form; or, possibly, some difference in the poet's temperament or circumstances; or even some difference in ourselves, which may modify our impression of the result. The factors efficient here would seem to be these: (1) The individual power and skill of the redactor actually brought into play. (2) The relative conditions of age, form, and consistency in which the various materials are furnished to his hand, in so far as these affect the inherent difficulty of the redactor's task, and the consequent demand for the exercise of conscious art. (3) The contemporary attitude of men regarding this material, as affecting the freedom which the poet may allow himself in dealing with it; and (4) our own knowledge or ignorance of the precise facts and conditions of the redaction, which unconsciously, but surely, affects our impression, and therefore our classification, of individual epics.

As for the first point, organizing and poetic power of a very high order is presumed in the case of any poem which the suffrage of the world has crowned as an epic. That fact is the demonstration of its presence. Differences of degree within this first order of poetic power, or differences of aspect and function, while affecting the rank of the epic, so far as I can see, do not at all affect its classification under one or other of the two kinds now under consideration. There remains, however, the pertinent question of how constantly and how pervasively is this organizing power evoked, how large is the demand made upon it, and how obvious are the proofs of its exercise. Since these are matters immediately concerned with the remaining heads of my discussion, I shall defer them until we encounter them in their places further on.

The second point—the actual form and condition of the raw material of epic poetry which comes to the redactor's hands—is one of considerable importance. If the redaction takes place not too long after the close of the natural

growth of folk-lore and legend; if the material reflects the imaginative life of a single unitary people, and therefore of a single epoch, we should expect to find in it a degree of homogeneity both in matter and in manner, which would very greatly simplify the task of redaction. Artistic selection would be very largely anticipated by what we might call natural selection. Many of the forms and features of communal art, being already in harmony with each other and with the main theme, would inevitably be preserved in the finished work. Not that there would be less need of the consummate poet, or less opportunity for him, but his art would largely efface *him*. The pervading sense of a single dominant personality would to us be greatly lowered, with corresponding heightening of the features of impersonal, *i.e.*, racial, coöperation. A work so brought into final form we should certainly count a Folk-epic;—and such a work is the Iliad.

But let us suppose the contrary case:—that the mass of legendary material for the coming epic concerns a number of diverse peoples; that its various elements have been developed under widely differing conditions, and even in different epochs; that there are fundamental discrepancies of situation or of story to be harmonized or eliminated, action to be newly motived, and all its scenes brought as it were into one focus and reduced to one scale; that all its life, of whatever original cast, is all to be made to assume the guise and setting of an already fabulous heroic age whose only examples are the Iliad and the Odyssey. In such a case the dominance of the individual and of his art will be greatly enhanced;—we shall everywhere feel the presence of the poet. Quite apart perhaps from what we now know of its origin, we might for this reason alone account the Æneid an Art-epic.

Or let us put one other case. If in the thirteenth century, either in France or in England, the Arthurian legend had found its poet of genius, and if he had been uplifted

on a swelling tide of national or racial enthusiasm, we should doubtless have had a genuine Folk-epic. But if Milton in the seventeenth century had carried through to completion his earlier and long-brooded purpose,—had given us the British instead of the Hebrew story,—we should certainly have had an Art-epic. Between these two dates—in Chaucer's time or again in Malory's, had either of these men been fitted for the task,—we should have had a result which might conceivably have been of either kind, according to the obtrusiveness of the personality and art,—the original prominence, that is, of the personal signature; but in part also according to the degree in which the lapse of time has caused that signature to fade from our view. But, on the other hand, had Shakespeare's genius been epical rather than dramatic, and had he—late as his period was—addressed himself to this story, I venture to believe the work would be rated as a Folk-epic. Shakespeare is the known and historic type of a great poetic organizer like our unknown and mythical Homer. His is the skill to work with unhewn stones—with masses of material most diverse in origin and form,—and with the least possible alteration of them, to build them into a noble edifice. His is the art which effaces art, as it certainly did even to his contemporaries. The very opposite is true when we come to the only great poet who ever actually wrought in these particular materials—to Tennyson and his Idylls of the King. Though these attain not to the continuity and completeness of the epic and are therefore only epical, there can be no doubt as to their classification with reference to the question we are now considering. They represent the acme of conscious and personal art,—the utmost remove from the features of the Folk-epic.

The third point,—as to the part which contemporary belief, conviction, and reverence for tradition may play in limiting the redactor's freedom in the exercise of his art,—seems to me to be of not nearly so much importance to our

present discussion as some appear to think. That strong contemporary feeling toward the tradition—and especially the redactor's own feeling as reflecting that of his time—would powerfully affect the freedom of his art along certain lines is undoubtedly true. But that the presence of such affirmative feeling should have much to do with making the outcome an epic of the Folk-species, or that its absence, leaving the poet more fancy-free, should of itself tend to make his art more dominant, and so give us an Art-epic, seems to me an unwarranted conclusion, and one not borne out by the facts. Virgil, as Heinze has abundantly shown, feels bound religiously to respect the tradition. He may choose between different versions of the tradition that one which best suits his purpose. He may fill up gaps in the tradition with material of his own invention. He may graft foreign tradition upon the native or the Grecian stock. Above all, he may amplify, embellish, may supply motive, occasion, and setting; may infuse into it all his own genius, his own poetic aspiration. But in all essentials Virgil sticks close to his text. Nevertheless his work is the very type of the Art-epic.

On the other hand Homer seems to have worked in an atmosphere of much greater freedom. Myth and legend seem plastic in his hands, and that in spite of much greater apparent belief and reverence, both as regards the heroic and as regards the divine phases of the legend, than is conceivable in Virgil's time.

Milton, at a greater distance from the origins than was the case with either of these, is nevertheless confronted both within himself and in the world about him by a conviction much more rigid and definite than Homer's, and by a scruple which bound him to follow the letter much more closely than did Virgil. It is worth while moreover in this connection to note how closely Tennyson too has followed Malory, though surely neither the poet himself nor his age could have felt the slightest scruple—unless it were an

artistic one—to prevent him from doing as he would with heroes whose very existence at all in the flesh is openly doubted or denied. Certain human types from the old myths, it is true, have become symbolic—are now psychological studies, and poets in succeeding ages are fond of shaping them anew in the image and fashion of their own times, and trying their reaction under changed conditions and social ideals. Such old types freely dealt with anew are of immense importance and interest as landmarks of the progress of human thought, and the gradual shift of its ideals. Such are the Ulysses of Dante and of Tennyson, the Prometheus of Shelley and of Lowell, the Faust of Marlowe and of Goethe, and the various impersonations of the Satan-type—including Prometheus—from the Satan of Job to Mephistopheles. These are dealt with more freely perhaps in proportion to their distance from their originals. But apart from such cases as these, the very reverse of the usual assumption would seem quite as close to the truth, if not closer; namely, the nearer the beginnings, the more plastic in general is the material of the tradition; and not until late is it likely to crystallize into definite dogma, or become a matter of creed which one touches at his peril.

The last point is one I have never seen discussed or even mentioned; yet it seems to me deserving of serious attention. The assignment of a great poem to the one class or the other is not in every case, surely, a matter of objective certainty or of absolute demonstration. It is rather the outcome of a total impression made upon *us;*—the impression of the presence or absence of a single conscious purpose powerful enough to coördinate and unify all details, and of a conscious personal technique and art which make themselves felt there in the work. All poems that we know of epic grade root themselves in some great tradition of which they are the final and consummate flower. All of them therefore have the popular, the communal element, the fragmentary and discrepant material as their basis,

needing to be fused in the central heat of some great artistic imagination before the broken fragments can become a great poem. Conversely all poems which we account worthy to take rank as epics have had, we feel sure, from some hand this final personal shaping; since the constant tendency to ramify and diverge, which is the mark of the popular, the communal, phase of the process, could never reverse itself without passing out of that phase into the phase of personal art. Both the communal origin, then, and the personal art are present in every epic. The difference therefore becomes a question of degree and not of kind: How completely has the organizing imagination and purpose mastered these unorganized materials? How far have the resources of the poet's expressive art sufficed to give the resulting conception adequate and harmonious expression? Perfection in either kind it is idle to look for. No imagination can suffice to reconcile all discrepancies, to fill up all gaps in material so originating; nor can any art working on so vast a scale efface entirely all traces of the tools of previous workmen. Every work of art is really a palimpsest, but epic art more so than any other, and inevitably so.

Here as elsewhere hindsight is proverbially better than foresight;—we see what we are prepared to see. The distinguished scientist, you remember, who when asked to observe some specially interesting object made ready for him in the field of the miscroscope, instinctively paused to ask before he would look, "What am I to see?" was quite right. Had he not received that direction, he might have looked in vain;—he might have missed entirely the intended demonstration. So here in a great epic a conscious purpose is much more clearly discerned when we know what to look for, when we have learned from other sources somewhat of the artist's character and tendencies. His art is more apparent the more we know of his artistic training, his masters, his models, and the history of his development.

If these elements in his case are well known, and known to be efficient and powerful, the presumption of course will be strong that they will be found in the epic he has worked upon, and that they will determine its artistic quality. But it is conceivable also that for one reason or another these powers, though generally pronounced enough, may have been feebly exercised in any particular case; or even though competent, the poet may be without a strong egoistic manner. In such cases we might find ourselves quite at a loss, and our demonstration would not be complete till we had unearthed the quarry in which he worked, had found the rough blocks which he was to build into his stately edifice:—that is, had discovered his sources in the form in which they came to his hands. Not until this has been done have we any absolute control upon subjective and impressionistic judgment. In Milton's case we have of course full information on all these points. Yet it seems to us, no doubt, that without any of this information we should be able to recognize anywhere that splendid egoism of character and the music of that "organ voice of England";—and so I agree we should in general. But I am not so sure of detail and of special passages. What would the art critic of three millenniums hence, with no Bible, no Homer, no Dante, no Tasso, no history, and no other poems of Milton to afford him a clew—what would he make of the allegory of Sin and Death, of that grotesque Limbo on "the backside of the world," of that other grotesque and irrationality of battle in Heaven with gunpowder and cannon, of coarse punning speech on the part of archangels who count themselves equals of the Most High, or of that scene in the grand audience chamber of Hell, when "Princes, Powers, Potentates, the flower of Heaven once lost" assembled to hear the report of their mighty leader's success, suddenly fall prone and grovelling in guise of serpents, and instead of the intended applause utter only "a dismal universal hiss"? Or what would he make of the

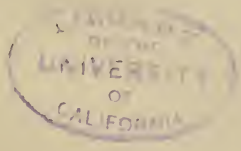
passages where Milton's scruple about the very words of scripture has given us whole blocks of lines which are little more than centos, whose metrical form even does not conform to rules which Milton elsewhere observes? Under criticism like that we are only too familiar with would not these almost inevitably be marked as "intrusive materials," unassimilated and unassimilible;—instances in fact of the very sort of thing which characterize the Folk-epic? Yet most of these, as we know, are Milton's own invention pure and simple, and are not found in any of his models or sources. All this, be it observed, in the case of Milton, whose personality and art are as definite and unmistakable as any we know in literature. But suppose the artist of Paradise Lost had been quite another, yet as great or even greater than Milton; but an artist of a different method;—suppose it had been Shakespeare, working broadly and rapidly, incurious of minute and uniform finish, compelled by haste to collaborate with other men, to appropriate whole blocks of material either as it stood, or with slight touches of his own,—an artist of no one fixed mood and master-temper to betray him, but of immense range and compass—had it been so, what could the critic do but pronounce the work a Folk-epic? Is it not conceivable—nay, is it not even probable—that such is the case with Homer? Clearly then our knowledge—that is, our ignorance—of the facts may determine our judgment, and may determine it wrongly. It is at least a significant fact that of all the works we agree to call Folk-epics not one, so far as I can recall, has grown to completion within the range of our vision and recorded observation; and not one of our so-called Art-epics is the work of an artist we do not personally know.

These arguments, it may be said, are purely hypothetical; and such they are frankly admitted to be. But such too, it seems to me, are the arguments which oppose them. The fact is that the group of poems we are now considering is so small, so essentially diverse in character, and

with few exceptions so absolutely unknown to us in the real facts and circumstances of their origin, that sound generalization is extremely difficult, to say the least; and dogmatism of any sort is entirely out of place. If we consider the standard epics of both sorts along with other forms of literature most nearly allied to them, we shall find that they form an almost perfect series with no impassable gaps. Beginning with mere collections of ballads and lays, like those of Percy and Child, they grade upward into cycles like the Arthurian Romances, and these again into definite redactions and integrations like the Morte d'Arthur or the Kalévala. Between these and the lower grade of epics—more or less doubtfully of that rank—such as Beowulf, the Nibelungenlied, and the Mahābhārata, it would be difficult to draw any sure line save that of our own knowledge or ignorance of the precise conditions of the final shaping. Passing these, we come to the Homeric poems, the surest types for us of the genuine Epic. And after all the tumult of battle which has raged about them, it is interesting to note, as Matthew Arnold points out, that the most abiding impression they make upon the appreciative reader is the impression of essential unity, pointing clearly to the work of some single poet of uncommon mastery and skill, though otherwise unknown to us. In this same group we should doubtless put the Rāmāyana and very likely some others of unknown authorship, if only we count them in general character and excellence worthy to stand in this privileged group—as, for instance, the Cid, or even some of those named in the preceding group. Of intrinsic character quite akin to these, but of known authorship, are the Æneid, the Divina Commedia, Shah Nāmah, and Paradise Lost; and with these, but for its dramatic form,—in this case hardly a vital matter,— should be associated Goethe's Faust. Beyond these still are certain elaborate poetical studies both ancient and modern, in various form and to different artistic ends, but on themes from the epic field:—Prometheus,

Ulysses, Agamemnon, Ajax, Encecladus, Œnone, Iphigenia, with Tennyson's Arthurian Idylls and many others;—through which field our quest brings us back once more into the realm of general poetry.

To sum up very briefly, then, the conclusions of this paper may be stated somewhat as follows: (1) The ultimate materials used in each of the epic forms we have been considering are the same: myth, legend, and tradition. The complete and final form moreover is due to the skill of some individual poet and artist. The elements of difference then are either the essential character and the degree of elaboration of the popular materials used, or the boldness of the signature of the artist. (2) If we regard the actual condition of the materials used as not of any great importance in this present discussion, and therefore negligible here, there remains the signature of the artist to be considered—the impress of his personality. Not merely will this actually vary through all degrees with the character and force of the artist, but the signature itself in any given work is not forever a constant quantity. Bolder and blacker at first, it inevitably fades with time; and especially when read in the twilight of our ignorance, it is sure to seem to us fainter than it really is. It cannot therefore be a sure criterion by which to classify works of different men and of different times. In further support of this point is the surprising uniformity of rating in the one group all the works of known artists, and in the other all the works of artists unknown. (3) The distinction then between the Folk-epic and the Art-epic so-called is a vanishing one, convenient indeed for certain purposes of education and criticism, and in typical cases apparent enough for such purposes; but too subjective—too impressionistic—too little based on fact and knowledge to be final.



FOURTEEN DAY USE
RETURN TO DESK FROM WHICH BORROWED

This book is due on the last date stamped below, or on the date to which renewed.
Renewed books are subject to immediate recall.

25Jan'56 VH

JAN 30 1958

MAR 3 1967 6 0

RECEIVED

MAR 21 '67 -3 AM

LOAN DEPT.

JAN 6 1976 7 9

LD 21-100m-2,'55
(B139s22)476

General Library
University of California
Berkeley